

Adolescence
Stephen Paget

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BY

STEPHEN PAGET

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THIS lecture was read to Oxford University Extension Students, in the Sheldonian Theatre, in August, 1917. The general subject of the lectures and classes was "The Near Future: problems of construction and reconstruction."

The Master of University College, who presided over the meeting, pointed out that I had said nothing of the help which is given to young men by their sisters. He spoke

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of the legions of young men who "keep straight" because they keep in mind what their sisters are to them. I ought to have said something of this influence of home-life.

And I ought, perhaps, to have defined with more exactness the very words which I would use, if it were my duty to attempt a boy's "sex-education"—we could hardly find an uglier title for it. But I was afraid to say more than I did say. The great thing is, that the parent, or it may be the teacher, should be able to tell the child, "Do come to me, right away,

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whenever you are puzzled or shocked at anything that you read, or hear, or notice : and I will tell you, as well as I can, all that you need to know about it." And the greatest thing of all is careful self-preparation. To answer a child with evasive or lying nonsense is to offend the child : and we have it on good authority that we deserve for that offence the millstone round our necks, and the depth of the sea.



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THE honour of coming here was embittered by the difficulty of deciding what to say and how to say it. One of the hardest of all subjects, adolescence, was given to me : with this added hardship, that I was to consider it as something which may be reconstructed in the near future ; or as a problem which we may somehow solve. It needs more than a man

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to understand adolescence: it needs, at the very least, a Royal Commission. I do not understand, really understand, anybody except myself; indeed, I do not thoroughly understand even me. One thing, to begin with, I did know about adolescence. I knew that it was a Latin word. So I looked it up in the Latin dictionary. And there I found to my surprise that the ancients were not agreed as to the term of adolescence. Varro reckons it from the 15th to the 30th year of life. Cicero speaks of Crassus, at 34, as adolescent: he even uses the word of

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Brutus and Cassius, when they were 40; and, what is most unexpected of all, he uses it of himself, in the year of his Consulship, when he was 44. Nothing could be more incorrigibly middle-aged than Cicero at 44; nothing could be more finally settled beyond all possibility of unsettlement. We cannot discuss adolescence, if it is to include persons of that standing.

Shall we therefore put this word back in the Latin dictionary, and speak not of adolescence but of youth? But the word youth hardly

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takes into account the bodily changes which occur between childhood and adult life. We are concerned here with the school-room years, the threshold years, say, from 14 to 18. All of us, when we think seriously about boys and girls from 14 to 18 years old, have at the back of our minds the thought of sex. And you must forgive me, if I use very plain words this evening: for I hope and believe that you will prefer, from a man of my profession, plain speaking to roundabout phrases.

My theme is adolescence: I have

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no right to talk about small children. But how can I help myself? Boys and girls begin to be vaguely conscious of sex, long before they are 14; some of them get into unclean habits, or say unclean things, when they are nearer to 4 than they are to 14; indeed, they may get into unclean habits before they are 4. If we are to understand the schoolroom, we must first understand the nursery. Children, by the time that they are 14, are what those 14 years have made them, with our assistance, or with our neglect.

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But, as all of us are well aware, no two children are exactly alike in this matter. The differences between them are finely graduated; but the extremes of difference are miles apart. Some children are wholly incurious about sex; some are slightly inquisitive, some are very inquisitive, and some, but very few, not one in a thousand, are downright vicious and obsessed.

We are too ready, it may be, to give all our praise to those who are wholly incurious; we call them healthy-minded, pure-minded, and

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so forth. We admire them because they take no interest in this part of their natural life, just as we admire them because they take no interest in the working of their brains and their digestive organs. But there is nothing very admirable in this blank indifference toward the affairs of the body; it is good common sense, but we ought to think twice before we regard it as a virtue: it is altogether negative, and virtues are something positive. We can safely afford to keep some of our admiration for the children who are in-

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quisitive. Besides, we have no business to put the possession of sex on a level with the possession of digestive organs. The facts of digestion are merely physiological: you can take them or leave them. The facts of sex are not merely physiological: and it is perilous, either to take them or to leave them.

Of course, the incurious child is more easy to talk to, more easy to get on with, than the inquisitive child; but we can hardly wish all boys and girls from 14 to 18 to remain thus childish in their know-

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ledge of themselves. I do not believe that what we call "innocence" is any sure protection to boys or to girls against impure or perverted ways in adolescence. Indeed, I am inclined to believe that innocence, or ignorance, may even betray them instead of protecting them.

Besides, it is the accepted way of intelligent children to be inquisitive: it is their birthright to ask us any amount of questions. A child who never asks a question about sex is indeed, so far as that goes, a backward child: what we call

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unobservant. In some ways, this non-questioning mind is good for young children; but surely it is unnatural that the children should attain to adolescence and still be ignorant of what they are.

Whether these incurious children tend to be passionless in early adult life, I do not know; nor can I make any guess as to the proportion, in adolescence, of temperaments devoid of passion. Only, if they who are incurious during childhood do tend to be passionless in later years, that is no reason why we should admire them as children.

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For, in the design of our nature, and in the fabric of our nature, there is a place, and a very honourable place, for passion held under control. And they who have nothing to control are to be congratulated, because they are out of the way of temptation ; but we admire, even more, those who are in the way of temptation and withstand it.

If this be true, or anywhere near true, that a measure of inquisitiveness in childhood, and a measure of passion in early adult life, are welcome signs of a sane mind in a

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sane body, such as Juvenal bids us pray for, then it follows that we ought to give careful regard to these inquisitive children, and wise and honest answers to their embarrassing questions.

But we grown-up folk are not agreed, nor ever shall be, what to tell them, and when to tell it. We have no set method of talking to children about sex, nor of warning older boys and girls against the miseries into which it may, if they let it, bring them. Of course, this want of agreement is not altogether our fault; we are so divided, be-

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cause the children are so diverse. Their differences of temperament are reflected in our different ways of dealing with them. The fact remains, that we have no common plan, no authorised programme: and, if ever we do invent one, which we never shall, it will not suit all the children. Each of us, in this perplexity, judges for himself or herself; there is nothing else to be done.

Still, we can be agreed over some points; we can make one or two rules, and keep them before us. It is a good rule, surely, that

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we should prepare ourselves and arm ourselves against the shock of a sudden question. We must have our answers ready. We must rehearse, we must learn almost word for word, as it were by heart, what we will say, when the inevitable demand for facts is sprung on us. That is our bounden duty, to make up our phrases beforehand, so that we shall not be caught unawares. It is not fair to the children that we should give them stupid floundering answers, or snub them, or shut them up. They have a perfect right to a

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well thought out answer. That is the meaning of what Horace says, that the utmost reverence is due to them. We cannot better reverence them than by deciding, long before the question comes, how we will handle it. Think for a moment what silly things are said to children, all for want of careful self-preparation.

To this good rule we might add another—that we must never tell them a lie. We ought not to be liars, not even to small children. Take, for instance, one of the best of all opportunities for telling the

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truth; take the arrival of a baby brother or sister. Where did it come from? I have no patience with people who say that the angels, or the doctor, brought it. There is enough nonsense already talked about my profession without that. What business have they to lie to an honest child? Or take a more heart-searching instance. Imagine a child at Christmas-time playing with that most beautiful of all Christmas toys, a little *crèche*, with little figures of Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in a manger; and the child turns round and asks

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you where Baby Jesus came from. What answer will you give? What harm can it do to a child, to know that children are born of their mothers? What does harm the minds of children is not our plain speaking; it is their own secret reading, gossiping, and imagining.

Now let me venture a bit further. In the kingdom of a child's mind, it is not one set of thoughts, but two, which gradually rise to power, as the child grows to adult life. Right away from the nursery age, these two ideas are important above all others; important alike

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to the child and to us. One is the child's notions about sex; the other is the child's notions about God. Everything else wavers and shifts; we see the children change every scrap of their minds over and over again: their likes and their dislikes, their plans and their decisions, flourish and perish, and are no more than stages or phases. But these two purposes of their curiosity—the desire to know what sex is, and the desire to know what God is—these endure, and are more imperative with every added year of life.

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As the children ask very absurd questions about sex, so they ask very absurd questions about God. As we are taken aback, and say foolish things to them over the one subject, so we do over the other. As we ought to prepare ourselves for the one opportunity, so we ought for the other. As we must answer properly about sex, so we must answer properly about God. It is bad enough to shut them up over sex; it is worse to shut them up over God. They are trying to get at something. They, at their end of life, are like Sir John Falstaff

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at his end of life—you remember the account of his death, by the hostess of the Boar's Head Tavern:

So 'a cried out—God, God, God!—three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet.

Whatever we say to the children we must never say that. But who will teach us what we ought to say? Perhaps we might make a rule that we will try not to play down to their childish notions. On the contrary, we will try to tell them that our grown-up notions are hardly less childish than theirs.

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We cannot worship their little graven image, but we can confess to them that our own image is a very poor thing. They will be glad to hear of the feebleness of our thoughts. We want to lead them out of their first position: we want to get them a little further on the interminable quest. We shall not do that by accepting and adopting their idea of God, using it as an argument or weapon against them. But we may perhaps be of use to them, if we explain to them that we, even we, are nothing better than babies, when it comes to at-

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tempting to think of what we really mean by the Divine Name. Let us inform them plainly, that the best that we can do for them is to conduct them out of the poverty of their minds into the poverty of ours. It is possible, also, that we might find it a good rule with children, to make less use of the word "God," and more use of the word "the Spirit," or "the Holy Spirit." This word "Spirit" is not associated in their minds with any bodily shape ; it may thus help them, as time goes on, to forsake their little graven image.

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I do believe that these two ideas—the idea of sex, and the idea of God—are of the utmost importance to us in our dealings with children and with adolescents. If we are to think of constructing and reconstructing human lives as if they were houses, let us have the proper materials for it, and let us handle them wisely. These two ideas are good materials; they will take any amount of construction and of reconstruction, and, if we build as we ought, they will stand the very heavy strain which will be put on them. Please forgive me, that I

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am treating my subject on these old-fashioned lines; I did not choose it: the authorities chose it for me. They ought to have given it not to a mere grandpapa, but to somebody worthy of the unmusical name of an educationalist.

In adolescence, in early adult life, there comes a heavy strain on these two ideas, and unless we have built as we ought, some portion of the edifice will be in danger of falling. The point is, that we must somehow manage to build these two ideas together; we must adjust and fit them together, giving

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to each of them its due place in the house of life, not opposing but conjoining them to each other, as a builder conjoins bricks and mortar. It is a true saying, "The reasonable soul and flesh is one man." Please observe that they not *are*, but *is*, one man; they are so closely united that they *is* one man. It follows, that what we call temptation addresses itself not to the flesh alone, but also to the reasonable soul. Consider the predicament of a young man who up to now has, as we call it, "kept straight." All round him, day after day, news-

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papers and books and shop windows and theatres, and other men's talk, and the look of the crowd in the streets, are alluding to it. His pride is wounded, and the more he tries not to think of it, the more it hurts. All young men covet and pursue the experiences of life; he is vexed and resentful that he should be thus incomplete. He has given up what a young man most hates to give up: he has given up something which would make him just like other young men. Not only his body, but his reasonable soul, is restless and impatient.

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That which impels him to the edge of temptation is not his animal nature but his whole human nature

Other motives, alike in boys and in girls, are vanity, sentimentality, and intolerance, especially in these tremendous days, of the monotonous narrowness of their work and the fretful discipline of their homes. And there are some boys and girls—happily it is a small minority—who are so passionate and so wilful that they hardly stop to reckon what they are doing.

Of course, we have some antidotes against temptation. One of

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them is the right employment of mind and body; but the mind must not be employed at haphazard, and the body must not be over-fatigued. The employment of the mind must have a touch of refinement or fastidiousness: things which are lurid and vulgar must be recognised for what they are: the boys and girls must be fond of "good form"; they must be picky over books and theatres and picture-palaces and friendships. The employment of the body must have a touch of discipline or training: outdoor exercise, athletics in moderation,

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fresh air, plain food, cold water. If I could be a little boy again, I would join the Boy Scouts; if I could be a young man again, I would get on without alcohol and cigarettes.

To these approved antidotes, let me, as a doctor, add a good tonic, to steady the nerves of adolescence. I prescribe a full dose of the natural sciences. Some people believe in what are called "hobbies" for boys and girls. I do not think much of hobbies, if it comes to nothing more than photographing or stamp-collecting or

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carpentering at odd moments ; but I love to see boys and girls working hard at physics and chemistry. It is a grand thing for them : it really does tranquillise and strengthen them ; I like to believe that it even tends, as it were, to reduce their high temperature and their rapid pulse. All other employments of the adolescent mind—as Mrs. Tulliver, in *The Mill on the Floss*, says of the crowns of bonnets—they are “ so chancy : never two summers alike.” Books, art, politics, amusements, outward observances of religion—all of

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them are so chancy: all of them are open to the criticism of the young people. I remember, ages ago, a German professor dining at my father's house; and in the course of the talk some reference was made to St. Paul. "Ah! Paulus," said the Professor, "I have read his works; but I do not agree with Paulus." Science is not like that: there is no chanciness in her: we inevitably agree with her. If a chemical test goes wrong, we know that we have done it wrong. This eternal certainty gives to physics and chemistry, somehow,

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authority over the vagrant minds of boys and girls ; and this authority, surely, must help to keep them able to resist temptation.

These antidotes and this tonic are all very well ; but the best thing of all would be, for all boys and girls, unfailing belief in what we call the Spirit of God, or the Presence of God, in their daily affairs. I feel sure that there are many of them who are more likely to be kept straight by that than by anything else.

And, of course, it is our business

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to prepare them, with all the wisdom and forethought that we can manage to find in ourselves, for these dangerous years of early adult life. But we must begin while they are children; we must begin with careful answers to their ridiculous questions about sex and about God. These two ideas are our building-materials: we must work them together, not keep them apart, nor oppose them to each other; we must go on, constructing and reconstructing them in the growing fabric of the mind, adapting and adjusting them

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to each other: so that the children, when they come to adolescence, shall come to it neither ignorant nor helpless.

So many of us hang about the child's mind, in a timid sort of way, hesitating to go in. We look up at the windows, we peep through the letter-box, we try the back door, we ring the bell very gently—the left-hand bell, which is marked Servants; we dare not ring the visitors' bell, nor ply the knocker. And the child, all the while, is expecting us. We wait for opportunities. It is probable,

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with some children, that we ought to make them, not wait for them. I do not altogether like the word "initiate"; yet I have in my imagination some special day set and appointed for a grave little home-ceremony; the whole thing well thought out, the exhortation written down beforehand, every word of it. The occasion of telling boys and girls the truth about their bodily nature would thus be made solemn and memorable, as an act of their lives. I have been reading again that scene in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, where the Squire gives

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his parting advice to Tom, on the way to Rugby. It is one of the hundred best things in one of the hundred best books. Only, all boys and girls are not alike : there is need, with some of them, of saying more than the Squire said. Perhaps a birthday would afford a good opportunity. And, of course, it ought to be done at home : it ought to be done by the child's parents. Most of us here, when we were 14 or 15 years old, were confirmed, and received the Holy Communion. It was a little time of quiet self-judgment and good

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resolutions ; it really did help us. If I could have my life back, I should like to be told about my bodily nature in that devout and premeditated way. It ought to be done at home, and my father ought to do it, probably on my birthday. Instead of that, it was done by another boy, at a preparatory school. I still remember the exact words that we used, and I could still find almost the very paving-stone on which I was standing.

There are things to be said to children ; and there are things to

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be said to older boys and girls going out into the world. I cannot fix the right ages for it: no two children are alike. I feel, also, that first-rate school teachers are more likely than second-rate parents to say the right thing to children. There is a place, doubtless, in school teaching, for lessons in botany and in natural history. The trouble is, that some of the children may fail to see what you are driving at. You can lead them to the very edge of the stream of analogy, but you cannot make them drink. They may re-

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main, at the last moment, recalcitrant; and you may never get quite so far as to tell them what you were intending to tell them.

If it were my duty to inform a boy, between 12 and 14 years old—and it certainly is not the business of any man to speak to girls about their bodily nature—I would not begin with botany. I would begin with mankind. I would tell him that all of us come out of the bodies of our mothers: and in that way come all creatures. I would argue from us to animals, not from animals to us. Then I

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would say something about the anatomical differences between male and female children: and I would tell him that this difference runs through all creation, all the distance from us down to plants and flowers. And I would say to him, "All creatures are formed in this way, in the bodies of their mothers, before they are born: but they cannot begin to be formed, till the male and the female have actually come together: and that is all that you need to know." If it were my duty to talk to a young man 18 or 19 years old, I would

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talk to him as to any other man, freely and explicitly; I would also warn him of the disastrous bodily results which may follow even one act of wrong-doing, and how these results might be visited, years hence, on his children. And, of course, whatever the age, I would not only lecture, I would also preach. If I am to help a boy to "keep straight," I must appeal from that which is natural in him to that which is spiritual in him.

And—so far as adolescence is concerned—if ever there was a time when we ought to speak

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plainly, it is now. Whether we like it or not, the old habit of silence has for some years been falling away from us. Even before the War, we had begun to talk more freely, and to be less offended by plain speaking. The War has made it still harder for us to remain silent. We have seen, everywhere, boys and girls, all of a sudden, as it were transfigured: the boys turned into men, the girls turned into women; courage, obedience, endurance, flaming up in them, so that we marvel at them. But we have seen, also, the dark side of

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their life. They have gone ahead so fast, and their eyes are so dazzled, that some of them will not stop to read our danger-signals. Most of us have some influence over them, some of us have great influence. Things already are bad enough, and, in all probability, will be worse in the near future. Our influence was not given to us for nothing: and if we do not exercise it now, we shall be sorry, too late.

There is one more bit of advice, in these days, which we might give to young men. The War

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seems to make it somehow wrong, that a young man, of decent character, in good health and steady work, should remain unmarried. He ought to marry, that sons of his may serve their country, filling the empty places of the young men who have died for their country. Before the War, it was nobody's business but his own, whether a young man were married or single. We observe him now from another point of view, with every added month of the War, and every casualty-list; we say that he is not doing his

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duty, if he prefers the comfort and the freedom of bachelor-life to the cares of marriage and parentage. Let him so live now, in these terrible days, that his children shall be born healthy, a blessing alike to him and to his country.

Now, to finish with, let me dot the *i*'s and cross the *t*'s of this paper. It is likely enough that I have been talking more of things as they were in my boyhood than of things as they are now. The Victorian Age was in many ways magnificent ; but it neither approved of inquisitive children, nor en-

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lightened them. For example— one of my contemporaries tells me that she was taught botany out of a book called *Lindley's Ladies' Botany*. In this book, the fact that flowers are male and female was carefully left out. She learned this fact when she was 18; she gathered it from a sermon in church, and it vexed and offended her. We have got past all that sort of nonsense. But we are still at sixes and sevens how to tell children about their bodily nature. We let them alone, they let us alone; we wait, they wait; neither we nor they like to

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begin. We do not know what they are thinking of. But we know this much, that there are two sets of thoughts which must, simply must, be growing up together in their minds—the idea of sex, and the idea of God. We cannot help them without self-preparation ; we muddle them, not educate them, on these two subjects, unless we have made up our own minds how we will answer their questions.

Further, I do believe that some parents might well make a solemn little home-ceremony of telling a child about his or her bodily nature ;

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not leave it to chance, nor to the unclean talk of schoolfellows; no, nor even leave it to the child's teachers. Father or mother ought to do it. And, when the children are grown up, it ought to be done again, with clear warning against the dangers which they are going into.

Finally, what they need is not physiology alone, but physiology and faith together. There has been a great deal too much science talked about adolescence. Too much physiology, pathology, psychology —not that psychology really is a

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science—too much analysis, too many statistics. If any of you, as parents or as teachers, do require a short science-book, there is Dr. Starr's *The Adolescent Period*. It has its faults. It is unduly apprehensive of some things which are not important. It makes too much of those boys and girls who are abnormal. Some children are abnormal; and some, but very few, are as it were demoniac, to their own misery and the misery of others. These most unhappy children have been put under the microscope for us by our kind

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friends the psychologists. But the vast majority of boys and girls are normal.

Dr. Starr's book is not for general reading. Still, for the right sort of readers, it is a good and useful book. But what, after all, do we want with books? It is the children that we have got to read; not books about them, but them. I doubt whether psychologists understand ordinary children better than a wise old family nurse understands them. Boys and girls are human beings: they were not discovered by science: they refuse

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to be elucidated by science. The way for us to help them is not by psychology, but by faith, self-preparation, courage, and common sense.



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